

Former leading atheist argues for the existence of God

A review of
There is a God: How The World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind
by Antony Flew
with Roy Varghese
Harper Collins,
New York, 2007

Lita Cosner

Skeptics often cite ‘testimonies’ of former professing Christians who ‘de-converted’ (apostatized) to atheism to show that Christianity is inherently unreasonable; sure, a person may be raised Christian, but once he is able to reason for himself, the light of rationality will wash away all that religious superstition. Of course, they often ignore or dismiss the conversion stories of former atheists. Antony Flew’s rejection of atheism is a nightmare for skeptics, because the most influential atheistic philosopher of the twentieth century is rather harder to dismiss out-of-hand. Flew documents this intellectual process in *There is a God*.

From Christianity to atheism

Flew begins the story of his rejection of atheism by explaining how he became an atheist in the first place. The son of a Methodist minister, Flew went to school as ‘a committed and conscientious, if unenthusiastic, Christian’ (p. 10), but during his studies began to question his faith. The problem of evil caused Flew to question the possibility of an omnipotent God. By the time he was 15, he considered himself an atheist (p. 15), although Flew admits that he ‘reached the conclusion about the nonexistence of God much too quickly, much too easily, and for what

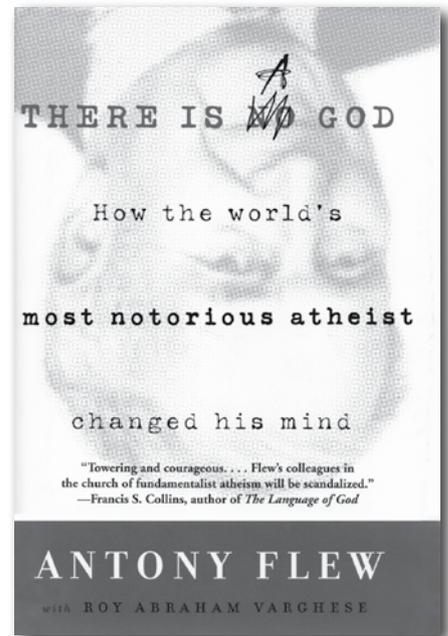
later seemed to me the wrong reasons’ (pp. 10–11).

Influential atheist works

Flew’s rejection of atheism would not be such a problem for atheists if he hadn’t been the foremost atheist thinker of the 20th century. In Oxford, Flew was part of the Socratic club, a forum for debate between atheists and Christians, of which C.S. Lewis was the president for over a decade. There he presented ‘Theology and Falsification’, a paper which argued that many theological statements have so many qualifications attached that they are essentially empty (pp. 43–44). However, he says, ‘I was not saying that statements of religious belief were meaningless. I simply challenged religious believers to explain how their statements are to be understood, especially in the light of conflicting data’ (p. 45). This 1950 paper sparked many responses, some decades after the paper was presented (p. 47).

In 1961, Flew published his next atheist work; *God and Philosophy* was Flew’s attempt to examine the basis for Christian theism. In a systematic argument for atheism, he contended that the ‘the design, cosmological, and moral arguments for God’s existence are invalid’ (p. 49). He argued that the concept of God must be sufficiently defined before God’s existence can be debated. He now considers this book to be ‘a historical relic’ (p. 52), and later in his current book advocates the design and cosmological arguments as valid evidence of God’s existence.

In 1971, Flew published *The Presumption of Atheism*. In his final work dealing with atheism, he argued that as the inherently more rational position, atheism should be presumed at the outset of any debate regarding God’s existence, and the burden of proof should be on the theist (p. 53).



He notes that the ‘headiest challenge’ to this argument came from Christian logician Alvin Plantinga, who argued that the belief in God is ‘properly basic’ for believers (p. 55). He clarifies that ‘the presumption of atheism is, at best, a methodological starting point, not an ontological conclusion’, and that the presumption of atheism could be accepted by theists who have adequate grounds for believing in God (p. 56).

Indeed, atheism itself has a number of propositions that have to be accepted by faith, e.g. that something (the universe) came from nothing, non-living matter evolved into living cells by stochastic chemistry, complex specified information arose without intelligence, morality arose by natural selection, etc.

From atheism to theism

Flew concentrated on other philosophical areas for the next several decades, only revisiting atheistic topics to debate people based on his previous works. He took part in cordial debates with theists, which included one in 1985 with philosopher and theologian Dr Gary Habermas on the most important reported deed of all, the proposition that Jesus Christ conquered death itself.¹ This debate was held in Dallas in front of a crowd of three thousand people. It was



The 20th century's most influential atheist thinker, Antony Flew, announced in 2004 that he accepted the existence of a God.

judged by two panels of experts from leading American universities: one panel comprised five philosophers who were asked to judge the content of the debate, and the other comprised five professional debate judges who were asked to judge the quality of the arguments.

Four of the five on the philosophers panel voted that Habermas had won, i.e. the case he made for the Resurrection was stronger than Flew's attempts to refute it, and one scored it a draw. The panel of professional debate judges voted three to two to Habermas.

At the most recent debate in 2004, at New York University, he declared that he 'now accepted the existence of a God' (p. 74). In that debate, he said that he believed that the origin of life points to a creative Intelligence,

'almost entirely because of the DNA investigations. What I think the DNA material has done is that it has shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce (life), that intelligence must have been involved in getting these extraordinarily diverse elements to work together. It's the enormous complexity of the number of elements and the enormous subtlety of the ways they work together. The meeting of these two parts at the right time

by chance is simply minute. It is all a matter of the enormous complexity by which the results were achieved, which looked to me like the work of intelligence' (p. 75).

Flew was particularly impressed with a physicist's refutation of the idea that monkeys at typewriters would eventually producing a Shakespearean sonnet. The likelihood of getting one Shakespearean sonnet by chance is one in 10^{690} ; to put this number in perspective, there are only 10^{80} particles in the universe. Flew concludes:

'If the theorem won't work for a single sonnet, then of course it's simply absurd to suggest that the more elaborate feat of the origin of life could have been achieved by chance' (p. 78).

Flew was also critical of Dawkins's 'selfish gene' idea, pointing out that 'natural selection does not positively produce anything. It only eliminates, or tends to eliminate, whatever is not competitive' (p. 78). He called Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene* 'a major exercise in popular mystification', and argued that Dawkins made the critical mistake of overlooking the fact that most observable traits in organisms are the result of the coding of many genes (p. 79).

Fingerprints of a designer

Flew's belief in God hinges on three aspects of nature: 'The first is the fact that nature obeys laws. The second is the dimension of life ... The third is the very existence of nature' (p. 89).

The Laws of nature

Every scientist must assume that nature acts in certain predictable, measurable ways; this is what makes scientific discovery possible. Paul Davies argued that 'science can proceed only if the scientist adopts an essentially theological worldview' (p. 107). However, there is really no reason why nature should follow laws; the existence of such laws requires an explanation. Three questions must be answered: 'Where do the laws of

physics come from? Why is it that we have these laws instead of some other set? How is that we have a set of laws that drives featureless gases to life, consciousness, and intelligence?' (p. 108). Flew argues along with many other classical and modern scientists that theism is the only serious answer.

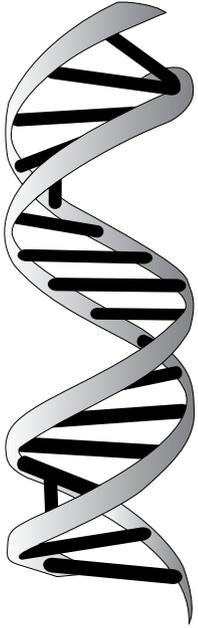
When Flew was an atheist, he argued that the universe and its laws were themselves ultimate (p. 134). Every belief has some fundamental assumption; for theists, the existence of God is the fundamental assumption. Flew, however, took the universe and its most fundamental features as that assumption. The discovery that the universe was not infinite threw a wrench into this assumption; if the universe had begun to exist at some point in time, it was reasonable to assume something caused its beginning. Because it is more likely that God exists uncaused, rather than the universe, it is logical to argue for the existence of God from the existence of the universe (pp. 144–145).

The fine-tuning of the universe

Not only does our universe follow finely tuned physical laws, but laws which seem to be finely tuned to enable life to exist. The most common atheist answer is to assert that our universe is one of many others—the 'multiverse' speculation. It is interesting that atheists who refuse to believe in an unseen God, based supposedly on the lack of evidence for His existence, explain away the appearance of design by embracing the existence of an unknown number of other universes for which there is no evidence—or even any *effect* of their evidence. In any case, Flew argues that even if there were multiple universes, it would not solve the atheists' dilemma; 'multiverse or not, we still have to come to terms with the origin of the laws of nature. And the only viable explanation here is the divine Mind' (p. 121).

The origin of life

The existence of physical laws which allow life to survive is necessary, but not sufficient by itself, for the existence of life. The question of the



The complexity of the genetic code led Flew to believe that the origin of life required a 'creative intelligence'.

origin of life became much more complex with the discovery of DNA, a molecule comprising 'letters' that code for the instructions to build the machinery of life. A real vicious circle is that the instructions to build decoding machinery are themselves encoded on the DNA. That life is governed by a complex code leads to the question:

'Can the origins of a system of coded chemistry be explained in a way that makes no appeal whatever to the kinds of facts that we otherwise invoke to explain codes and languages, systems of communication, the impress of ordinary words on the world of matter?' (p. 127).

He pointed out that natural selection can't explain the origin of *first* life. Ultimately, a vast amount of information is behind life, and in every other case, information necessarily points to an intelligent source, so it is only reasonable that there be a Source behind this information as well.

Flew's God

As an atheist, Flew struggled with the idea of an invisible, omnipresent Person, and how such a person could be identified (p. 148). However, Flew was making embodiment part of his definition of a person, which isn't justified. Philosopher Thomas Tracy defined persons simply as agents that are capable of acting intentionally (pp. 149–150). Although human persons are embodied, embodiment is not a necessary component for personhood.

Flew admits that 'At the very least, the studies of Tracy and Leftow show that the idea of an omnipotent Spirit is not intrinsically incoherent if we see such a Spirit as outside space and time that uniquely executes its intentions in the spatio-temporal continuum' (pp. 153–154).

Flew identifies his god as the god of Aristotle, with the attributes of 'immutability, immateriality, omnipotence, omniscience, oneness or indivisibility, perfect goodness and necessary existence' (p. 92). He is adamant that his conversion to theism does not represent a paradigm shift, because his paradigm remains simply to follow the argument where it leads (p. 89).

Is Flew's god the God of Scripture?

Some of the attributes of the god that Flew acknowledges are also attributes of God, but Flew does not acknowledge the Trinity or Christ as the second Person of the Trinity, both of which are essential Christian doctrines. So although Flew's deistic beliefs echo Christian belief in some areas, the god he accepts is not the same as the God of the Bible, although he professes to remain open to the evidence.

Flew never claims to be Christian; he is a self-identified deist who does not believe in an afterlife (p. 2). Nonetheless, he is charitable in his comments about the Christians he came in contact with, writing that his father, a Methodist minister, shared his 'eagerness of mind' even though their intellectual pursuits led them in different directions (p. 12). Flew concludes that he is 'entirely open to learning more about the divine Reality, especially in the light of what we know about the history of nature' and that 'the question of whether the Divine has revealed itself in human history remains a valid topic of discussion. You cannot limit the possibilities of omnipotence except to produce the logically impossible' (p. 157).

A critique of 'The New Atheism'

The first of two appendices in *There is a God* is a critique of the 'New

Atheism' by co-author Roy Varghese. Varghese argues that there are some phenomena that are only explainable in terms of the existence of God (p. 161). His view is that atheism is a result of a deliberate refusal to look at the evidence, which is readily available in our immediate experience (p. 163).

First, Varghese argues that something had to always exist, either God or the universe (p. 165). He maintains that the theist argument is superior because the atheist says that the eternal existence of the universe is inherently unexplainable, but theists argue that the eternal existence of God is not inexplicable, just incomprehensible for humans (p. 165). The atheist view also fails to explain why something exists rather than nothing, and why the something that exists obeys the laws of nature (p. 171).

Second, Varghese contends that most of the 'new atheists' do not even address the origin of life. Only Dawkins attempts an explanation; he claims that 'a chemical model need only predict that life will arise on one planet in a billion billion to give us a good and entirely satisfying explanation for the presence of life here' (p. 173). Varghese criticizes this as 'manifestly inadequate or worse' (p. 172) and as 'an audacious exercise in superstition' (p. 173), and indeed not even such an inadequate model exists.

Third, atheists have to deal with consciousness. Although certain areas of the brain are *associated with* consciousness, they do not *produce* consciousness—a certain area of a person's brain may show activity when thinking about a certain idea, but a neurologist cannot tell from that person's MRI what he is thinking about. 'Consciousness is correlated with certain regions of the brain, but when the same systems of neurons are present in the brain stem there is no "production" of consciousness' (p. 174). Fourth, 'beyond consciousness, there is the phenomenon of thought, of understanding, seeing meaning' (p. 176). 'At the foundation of all of our thinking, communicating, and use of language is a miraculous power. It

is the power of noting differences and similarities and of generalizing and universalizing—what the philosophers call concepts universals, and the like. It is natural to humans, unique, and simply mystifying’ (pp. 176–177). The brain plays a part in this process, but there is clearly a non-physical part to it, as well. Varghese argues that ‘they are the acts of a person who is inescapably both embodied and “ensouled”’ (p. 178). Fifth, the atheists have to deal with the emergence of the *self*, which he calls ‘the most obvious and unassailable and the most lethal for all forms of physicalism’ (p. 181).

Did God become incarnate?

The second appendix contains a dialogue between Flew and New Testament scholar N.T. Wright on the subject of ‘The self-revelation of God in human history’. Flew begins with some very charitable remarks about Christianity, saying that ‘I think that the Christian religion is the one religion that most clearly deserves to be honoured and respected whether or not its claim to be a divine revelation is true. There is nothing like the combination of a charismatic figure like Jesus and a first-class intellectual like St. Paul. ... If you’re wanting Omnipotence to set up a religion, this is the one to beat’ (pp. 185–186). However, he questions the reliability of the New Testament on the subject of the Resurrection, because the New Testament was written decades after the events they purport to describe, and the earliest of these, the Pauline letters, have little physical detail. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that ‘the claim concerning the resurrection is more impressive than by any by the religious competition’ (187).

Wright begins his rebuttal by showing that the evidence for Jesus’ historical existence makes Him one of ancient history’s most well-attested figures. He goes on to show that Jesus is depicted in the Gospels as acting in ways that are in accord with Jewish belief about God in the Second Temple period (188–92). He demonstrates that Christian beliefs about the resurrection differed radically from what pagans

believed, and differed substantially from Second Temple Jewish belief about resurrection. Christian belief about the Resurrection is unanimous from the earliest traditions through the first four or five generations; Wright argues that for this to be the case, there had to be a historical Resurrection that would serve as the basis for this new belief. Wright contends that though the Gospels were written later than the Pauline letters, the accounts of the Resurrection seem to stem from an oral tradition going back much earlier. Flew is impressed with Wright’s argument, and re-states that ‘you cannot limit the possibilities of omnipotence except to produce the logically impossible. Everything else is open to omnipotence’ (213).

This of course underlies the importance of the Resurrection debate with Habermas cited earlier. Flew still has no good answers to the strong case for the Resurrection.

Controversy regarding authorship

In the wake of its release, some skeptics claimed that the ideas expressed in *There is a God* did not really reflect Flew’s position and that he was being used by evangelicals.² First, Flew’s position is only close to the evangelical position in that deism is closer to evangelical Christianity than atheism; if evangelicals were trying to use Flew, they certainly did not do a very good job, as his book ends with him still questioning the reliability of the New Testament, the existence of an afterlife, and other core Christian concepts. The skeptics suggested that Varghese was the true author of the book, and that Flew was becoming mentally unstable in his advanced age. Flew does suffer from nominal aphasia, a condition which makes it hard to remember names, but denied all the allegations of ghost-writing and affirmed that the book was in line with his theistic views entirely.³

Indeed, these accusations also make little sense given the interview that Flew gave to none other than his former debate opponent, Gary Habermas.⁴

Conclusion

Many atheists say that religion is inherently unreasonable, and that if someone comes to faith in any deity, it is only because of a religious experience that is best unverifiable and at worst a form of delusion. However, Flew’s deistic argument is useful in that he, using arguments completely on the natural level, makes a powerful argument for God’s existence.

‘I must stress that my discovery of the Divine has proceeded on a purely natural level, without any reference to supernatural phenomena. It has been an exercise in what has traditionally been called natural theology. It has had no connection with any of the revealed religions. Nor do I claim to have had any personal experience of God or any experience that may be called supernatural or miraculous. In short, my discovery of the Divine has been a pilgrimage of reason and not of faith’ (p. 93).

Readers looking for an apologetic for Christianity will be disappointed, but the book is a good read. The book is powerful evidence that one can come to a belief in theism purely from the evidence. It is also a lesson that design alone is not enough for *saving* faith; that needs *special* revelation, which is likewise backed up by credible *historical* evidence as Habermas and Wright showed.

References

1. Habermas, G.R. and Flew, A.G.N., *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, Miethe, T.L. (Ed.), Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA, 1987.
2. For instance, Oppenheimer, M., ‘The Turning of an Atheist’, *New York Times*, 4 November 2007, <www.nytimes.com/2007/11/04/magazine/04Flew-t.html>.
3. See Varghese’s response at <blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2007/11/doubting_antony.html>.
4. My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: an exclusive interview with former British atheist Professor Antony Flew by Gary Habermas, *Philosophia Christi*, Winter 2005; <www.illustramedia.com/IDArticles/flew-interview.pdf>.